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By-Gerrard, Nathan L.

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There are two types of poor: the upwardly mobile and the stationary poor. The children of the latter present the greatest challenge to the public school system. Living in crowded quarters, poorly nourished, and given little preparation for the outside world, these children seem destined to fail. Their semiliterate mothers and fathers, if they have one, struggle to support a large family on welfare payments or on wages from irregular employment. When the stationary poor child begins school, he is ill-equipped intellectually, socially and emotionally to meet the demands of the middle class culture. His vocabulary is limited, he finds the classroom restrictive and feels inferior because of his social class. Neither his parents nor the school can provide him with the social and intellectual skills which he lacks. His feeling of distrust for authority generalizes to teachers, and truancy and delinquency often result. At the age of 16, he drops out of school, finds it difficult to get employment, and perpetuates the circle of poverty. (Author/LS)

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DISADVANTAGED YOUTH

Nathan L. Gerrard, Ph.D.
Professor and Chairman,
Department of Sociology
Morris Harvey College
Charleston, West Virginia

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DISADVANTAGED YOUTH

Styles of Life

When we think of "disadvantaged" or "underprivileged" or "deprived" youth, there is a tendency to think primarily in economic terms. We tend to think of the nine million white and the six million non-white children under the age of 18 who live in families with an annual income of less than $3,000 a year. Although all of these children come from "poor" families according to the standards of an affluent America, it would be very misleading to view the "poor" as a single homogeneous sociological group. There are as many different styles of life among the poor as there are among the affluent. We must try to differentiate between types of poor people if we are to understand their behavior and the social conditions of their existence, and develop effective social policies.

In this paper, an effort will be made to single out two types of poor people according to the extent they conform to the middle class values of thrift, self-improvement, hard work and morality. Failure to abide by these values in a modern industrialized America results in irregular employment, dependence on public assistance, and the failure to break out of the circle of poverty - and begins with the parents' failure to prepare the pre-school child for the long climb up the educational ladder.

I shall call the first type of poor the upwardly mobile poor, and the second type the stationary poor. You will understand that most families do not fit precisely into one or the other category, but have characteristics of both. For purposes of our analysis, however, let us assume at the beginning that there are only two distinct types of poor people.

The Upwardly Mobile Poor

Among the upwardly mobile poor, the family is intact. The heads of the family are regularly employed at tedious and backbreaking jobs as laborers, service workers, and farmers. They have little hope for advancement. When the women work, it is at unskilled or semi-skilled jobs in food stores, restaurants, hotels, hospitals, and the like. The prospect of welfare assistance is looked upon with repugnance by these families; they feel humilitated when severe illness or accidents force them to accept aid.

The mother, usually a little better educated than the father, prepare the young child for school by teaching him to recognize the letters of the alphabet, to tell time, to count. She may buy him crayons, paper, and blocks. The father, acutely aware that his own upward strivings have been blocked by his meager education, advises the older children to postpone marriage, and encourages them to finish high school.

The homes in which our upwardly mobile poor live are well-scrubbed and neat, clothes are clean even when patched, and the family income is carefully budgeted. The family raises its standard of living by spending many hours doing work in the home for which the middle class hires specialists: making clothes, curtains, slip covers, repairing automobiles, painting, plumbing.

Although far more time is spent in viewing television or listening to the radio than in reading, families may get a daily newspaper, and may even subscribe to a magazine such as Life or Reader's Digest. The home usually has a few books.

Family savings are small, and are used periodically to pay for emergencies, or the down-payment on consumer goods such as a new washing machine.

The family has a certain amount of economic security, although it is plagued with fear of unexpected medical bills or car breakdown which might take its entire savings. Even when the parents are somewhat satisfied, the older children may be dissatisfied with their standard of living.

Parents of the upwardly mobile poor attend church almost as regularly as the middle classes. Children are taught to respect their elders, especially those in authority, such as teachers, and their activities and associates outside the home tend to be supervised, particularly in urban areas.

Although parents believe that their marriage has been a good one because of the cooperation and mutual interest they have maintained throughout the years, they expect their children to enjoy a better life, to have a higher standard of living and a higher social position.

While only a minority of the boys and girls from these families who graduate high school enter college (the figure is even less for rural areas), a considerable number of girls enter business schools, nursing programs, and one-or two-year technicians' training courses. Many young men enter schools for drafting, television repair, air-conditioning and other technical pursuits associated with direct training for a position in industry. Almost everywhere in West Virginia this means leaving home, even leaving the state.

We have called these poor people upwardly mobile because while not many of the parents, particularly those over 40, will manage to move out of the ranks of the poor, their children probably will.

The Stationary Poor

This is the second group among the poor, the group whose children present the greatest challenge to the public school system.

Unemployment and Underemployment. Working adults in these families are mostly unskilled. Their jobs tend to be seasonal or cyclical so that there are long periods of unemployment and underemployment. There are periods of hard times, and over the years the family income has to be supplemented by various kinds of welfare payments. Many of these families have been receiving public assistance through two or three generations. It is extremely difficult to save money even for necessities on their low, irregular incomes; getting cash involves a constant struggle. Frequently the family does not know where the next meal is coming from. Food is bought whenever anyone has cash or food stamps, but during most of the month purchases are made only for one day ahead.

The ceaseless struggle to make ends meet, to take care of the barest necessities, tends to demoralize these families. Parents want the same things for themselves and their children as the more fortunate segments of society, but they have become cynical and fatalistic about their chances of realizing their goals. The result is a feeling of basic worthlessness and its accompanying poverty of the socialized emotions manifest in squalor, reckless hedonism, apathy and crime.

Squalor. The most pervasive and most conspicuous manifestation of demoralization (the loss of the persistent will to achieve one's life goals) is squalor- the failure to make the most of the little one has. "Home" is frequently a set of rooms overcrowded with a shifting group of relatives and friends. Dirty dishes in the sink, unrepaired,

tattered, broken furniture and household furnishings, dank and foul air, litter in the rooms and in the halls of the apartment or around the shack, bugs and sometimes rats, many children in one bed, poor heating and inadequate and unsanitary facilities, all characterize the living arrangements. Care of one's own things and respect for the possessions of others can hardly be developed in such surroundings.

These conditions foster fatigue and irritability; family members are prone to respiratory and communicable diseases. All this is bound to have a harmful effect on a child's study habits, on his attitude toward sex, and on parents' ability to give the child individual attention. The child does not linger in such a home. It is not a place to bring friends. It is not a haven where family members can bring their problems and receive understanding and reassurance. No wonder under these conditions the child spends as little time as possible at home, making parental control and supervision difficult.

The squalor in rural slums is almost as bad as that found in big city tenements. Roads leading to the houses are not paved, and may be impassable a good part of the year. Rural homes may be small, irregular combinations of clapboard, tarpaper, used brick and cement blocks put together from salvaged material. A recent study by the Appalachian Center at West Virginia University reveals that of 600,000 homes in West Virginia, 192,000 are in deteriorated or dilapidated condition. Ten thousand "homes" have only one room, and 160,000 have no indoor toilet facilities. The stationary poor live in the worst of these houses.

Reckless Hedonism. Also quite common among the stationary poor is reckless hedonism, the conviction of those leading insecure, unpredictable lives that a pleasure postponed is a pleasure forever lost. A commonly encountered view is: "I'm going to live today. Who cares about tomorrow?" In order to achieve the stimulation associated with

delusions of grandeur and feelings of omnipotence, there is heavy drinking and, in the big cities, the taking of drugs. Common-law marriages are frequent; there are more illegitimate than legitimate births in many of these family units. For young girls, motherhood - with or without marriage - may mean economic independence. "I don't have to listen to you!" one pregnant girl of fourteen, herself illegitimate, screamed at her mother. "I'll have my own welfare check soon!"

Other manifestations of reckless hedonism are incest, spur-of-the-moment purchases of luxuries when money is needed for necessities, desertion by the father when family obligations interfere with his pleasures, absenteeism or quitting of jobs in order to drink at a tavern or to watch a ball game on television, or in rural areas, to go hunting or fishing. The child growing up in such a home lives from day to day, even hour to hour, with little thought of his future as an adult.

Apathy. The most demoralized members of the stationary poor are those older persons who have discovered that reckless hedonism inevitably brings consequences too painful to bear, and who feel that their only alternative is to search for apathy, a state of mind which while devoid of pleasure is also devoid of pain. The quest for apathy is manifest not only in the soporfic types of alcoholism and drug addiction but also in the very high rates of the type of psychosis loosely called schizophrenia which apathy and withdrawal of affect from the external world are central.

The superintendent of one mental hospital in West Virginia reports an apathy among patients there which she believes has not been seen elsewhere in the country since the earliest depression days of the 1930s. Particularly among the stationary poor, this apathy is widespread, accentuated by a chronic loss of self-esteem: people feel they are so worthless they don't have a right to complain.

A few years ago a public spirited group of Kanawha County physicians gave physical and psychiatric examinations to 329 welfare clients listed as totally disabled. They found no cases of conscious malingering, but strong unconscious feelings of inferiority and guilt resulting in depressive apathy and serious physical ailments. The results of their findings were summed up in the graphic phrase: "Idleness Is A Disease." The quest for apathy is to be found in its most extreme form, of course, in the quest for final oblivion, in suicide. Suicide rates are highest in the bottom segment. West Virginians have a higher rate of suicide than the national average, a sobering statistic.

Crime. Perhaps the most spirited among those who were born in stationary poor families are the criminals who, feeling that the world is a jungle, no longer care to win the approval of "phony" conventional society, and are convinced that the only way to achieve self-esteem is by winning the esteem of others like themselves. The most able of them manage in the larger cities to organize highly profitable rackets (gambling, selling illicit liquor and drugs, prostitution, etc.). The less able and the younger, blocked by the lack of opportunity to profit from their Darwinian philosophy of life, go in for senseless violence: gang rumbles, rape and murder, tragically exemplified by the assassination of perhaps the most moderate and even-tempered of American presidents by the brooding failure, Lee Harvey Oswald. In rural areas there is much idle time spent wandering up and down the roads, but physical violence is most frequently directed against members of one's own family and friends, and seldom is brought to the attention of the police unless it involves murder. There is a suspicion that some deaths recorded as hunting accidents are, in reality, either murder or suicide.

West Virginia's crime rate is substantially lower than the national average, but part of this undoubtedly is due to the small number of urban areas where police patrols

normally work. Offenses which would be reported in the city go undetected or unreported in rural areas. However, when country boys go to the city to look for work or for entertainment, they may drift into trouble, serious trouble.

Pre-School Child and the Family. The pre-school child is poorly prepared intellectually, socially and emotionally to meet the demands of the middle class culture of the school. He is poorly prepared intellectually because his semi-literate mother is not able to help him. In her communication with him she expresses herself by gestures, grunts, or at best with sentences that are short, simple, and often incomplete. The absence of a father (for many of these children are illegitimate, or are reared in families which have been broken by death, divorce, desertion or separation) further tends to restrict the child's vocabulary and his understanding of the world beyond the doors of his home. The child may never have gone past his immediate neighborhood, and probably has not visited even the best-known landmarks in his own community. His whole style of life is reflected in his vocabulary, which often consists of fewer than 200 words, some pronounced in ways incomprehensible to the outsider. The child starts school with deficiencies so serious that even the most elementary Readiness books are much too advanced.

Teachers in some Head Start classes spend several weeks telling the child the words for simple objects such as chair, table, dress, trousers, plate, and fork. Many children hear objects correctly identified by name for the first time in a Head Start or first grade class.

Emotionally, too, the small child from the family of the stationary poor is not prepared for school. Already taught by older siblings and neighbors to hate or fear school, and accustomed to a good deal of freedom of movement, he finds the classroom impossibly restrictive. The problem is compounded because his parents have taught him to look

upon school not primarily as a place of learning, but as an Institution where he must keep out of trouble with teachers and peers.

Socially, the child feels inadequately prepared to handle middle class situations, and may feel rejected by classmates for his "stationary poor" appearance and behavior. When he attends a consolidated or multi-class school, his teacher and classmates identify him from the first day as belonging to the lowest social class, although they may not attach a label to their identification.

In short, these children come to school with nothing like the skills, the experience, the expectations and the confidence that five- and six-year old middle class children ordinarily possess.

The Older Child Rebels Against School. Many parents among the stationary poor have relatively little appreciation of family training which is not directly tied to the production of immediate economic values. We have seen that they have neither the ability nor the willingness to equip their children with the intellectual and social skills that win status in schools staffed by the middle class surrogates of the larger society. Consequently, their children are burdened with strong inferiority feelings when they are called upon to compare with children of middle class parents or with children of the upwardly mobile poor who employ middle class methods of child rearing.

Moreover, stationary poor parents rear children who grow up feeling that social authorities are hostile or indifferent to their welfare. In part, the distrust of social authority is a direct reflection of the parents' own suspicion toward police, clergy, teachers, doctors, public officials, health nurses, and social workers. The parents express their resentments freely in the home. Their children are quick to take over their attitudes.

More importantly, however, this generalized distrust of authority on the part of the older child is the direct product of experience within the family itself. Stationary poor parents frequently rear their children according to the mood and expediency of the moment rather than according to a system of social beliefs. Subject to the frustrations attending poverty, degraded social status, and other types of situational frustrations (broken homes, illness, etc.) many parents tend to relieve emotional tensions by employing child-rearing practices which damage the emotional security of the child. They rationalize free use of the belt or fist as "good, old-fashioned discipline." Other parents are indifferent to the child as long as he keeps out of their way. They punish him severely when he disturbes them inside the home, but are indifferent to what he does outside until he involves them in conflict with the community. The child grows up with the feeling that not even his parents are to be trusted. In school his attitude toward authority frequently is paranoid; he is certain that his teachers and principal "are out to get him" and that children of higher class status are contemptuous of him.

He is likely to hide his humiliating failure in school by seeking out others like himself in order to receive group psychological support for open rebellion. He and his friends are quick to rationalize that school is "the bunk." They defy their teachers with obstreperous behavior, insolence and disobedience. Often the result is ceaseless conflict between teachers and such children; the tendency to resist school authority is thereby strengthened and justified. With no other source of recognition, such young people bolster their shaky self-esteem by living up to their reputations as wild and uncontrollable. Repeated truancy and perhaps delinquency are the result, and often exactly at the age of 16 they drop out of school permanently. Teachers and principal are not sorry to see them go.

Summary

We have seen two types of poor: first, the upwardly mobile poor, the second, the stationary poor. Most poor families have some of the characteristics of each of these types, but we are primarily concerned with those whose style of life would label them the stationary poor.

What chance has a child born into such a family to break out of the circle of poverty? Living in crowded, unsanitary quarters, poorly nourished and subject to frequent illnesses, given little preparation for the world outside his immediate neighborhood, he seems destined to fail. His semi-literate mother and his father - if he has one - struggle to support their large family on Welfare payments or on the wages from irregular, low-paying employment.

The six-year old now enters school. Although his parents may have some vague conception of the relationship between an education and a "good job," they have little expectation that he will advance very far, and they have neither time nor will nor skill to aid him. Most schools are incapable of making up to the child for the intellectual and social skills he did not develop at home.

The youth leaves school or is, in effect, pushed out at the age of 16, educationally, socially, vocationally, emotionally unprepared. He marries early - often his bride is already pregnant - and finds it difficult to find employment.

The circle of poverty remains unbroken.

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